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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



[*The Editor is not responsible for opinions expressed in this Department.*]

NURSING UNDER DIFFICULTIES

I

DEAR EDITOR: Nurses have written of going into the slums of the city, of going to foreign countries, also the eastern and western parts of the United States to care for the sick. This has been my experience in one of the small towns in the extreme western part of Texas, the greatest state in the union. I was ready to go to my own home when a doctor telegraphed me to come west on the next train.

My trip of almost three hundred miles I enjoyed very much, all the way dreaming of the beautiful still prairies I was to see all covered with flowers; I arrived at my destination, a town of about fourteen hundred inhabitants, about midday. My dream of the beauty of the prairies was suddenly dispelled. I was in the midst of a furious sand storm, the wind blowing forty miles an hour, and every person wearing sand glasses to protect the eyes. There was no one to meet me. Thinking the doctor had not received my telegram, I asked the station agent if I could call him by telephone. He told me there was no telephone at the depot. I walked to a drug store about three blocks away and asked what I thought was a school boy where I could find Dr. G——. He said, "I am Dr. G——, and you are the nurse I sent for?" I told him I was and thanked him in a very sarcastic tone for his kindness in sending some one to meet me. I think my sarcasm was lost on him, he probably never understood it. He introduced me to the physician who was practicing with him. He was a very gruff old fellow and told me I was to nurse his patient, a pneumonia case. In the awful storm which they considered "only a slight wind," he took me to my patient's home on the outskirts of the town.

I found that the patient, a boy of sixteen, had pneumonia in the worst form. The house was built of thin boards with nothing to cover the cracks. There were three rooms with a fire only in the kitchen. The patient's bed was in the corner of one room, covered with a heavy canvas to protect him from the sand and wind. The doctor did not prescribe fresh air treatment. If he had I think probably we would have found the patient blown across the prairie.

I moved out of his room dozens of pairs of shoes, coats, hats, and many other things too numerous to mention, rags of all description from under the bed, most of them soiled from the patient's having expectorated in them. I burned those, and when I could get close to the bed the doctor told me to give him a general cleansing bath. I think he had never had a bath before. I used all the clean rags I could find for towels, and moved him on the only clean sheet the house afforded.

I stayed by his bedside thirty-six hours, then the doctor had me relieved and took me to another place to rest, for which I was truly thankful. The father, mother, and six children, ranging in ages from three to thirteen years, all

slept in one small room on pallets made of quilts not remarkable for their cleanliness.

The next morning the mother of the patient called the doctor and told him in a very shocked and horrified tone, "That trained nurse took my boy's underclothes off and bathed him." The doctor laughed heartily when I said: "Yes, I took them off, as I thought probably it was the only bath he ever had and I could not bathe him very well with them on."

Such were the surroundings of a bad case of pneumonia, not in the slums of the city, but in a country town where they have God's good air to breathe and where everything should spell cleanliness and health. The people were supposed to be civilized Americans and owned land worth fifteen thousand dollars, but were lazy and shiftless. Such are to be found all over the south.

My next patient in the same town was one of the dearest little women I have ever met and came from a home of wealth and refinement. Such nursing is to me like the foreign missionary work the different churches are doing. If the American people were educated up to it, there would be no need of going into foreign countries to do missionary work.

PEARL SNABLY.

II

DEAR EDITOR: A man came for me one Saturday morning to ask if I would go to a case of eclampsia, seven and one-half miles out in the country. Of course I said I would, and hurriedly put my house in order while the man did some errands. Our conveyance was a rickety open wagon, drawn by a rough looking pony, whose fastest gait was painful it was so slow. The road lay through farming country with occasional houses, some of them not much more than sheds of two or three rooms, for this is pioneer country and few of the farmers can afford to build larger houses. To an easterner it seems very crude, but these houses are really warm and comfortable if one will only compare them with those the pilgrim mothers must have lived in.

It was just noon when we arrived at a three-room board house, the last but one before the beginning of the timber line. The patient, a woman of nineteen, had been married for about a year. The baby was born on Friday night. She had had one convulsion before the birth of the child, and several during the night, the last at 8.30 that morning. The doctor had been with her all night, but left before I came, and had given little hope of the patient's recovery. She had no more convulsions, however, and when I left after nine days she was feeling very well, and beginning to enjoy the baby.

The conditions or lack of material would, I think, have staggered the average district nurse, for she has her bag and is usually within reach of supplies. There were a few baby clothes, all that were absolutely necessary, but not one thing to use for the mother. She had four sheets, one of them clean, but owing to her precarious condition I did not dare to move her to change it until late on Saturday. There was no clean nightdress, but on Sunday her sister-in-law sent over one which she "had worn one night," and after airing it out of doors and warming it for an hour by the stove I put it on the patient. It was a choice of evils and I chose what seemed the less. There were no pads or napkins, only some so-called clean rags in a flour sack, mostly pieces of fleece-lined cotton underwear and odds and ends of old shirts. From these scraps, as soon as I got time, I made up some pads and sterilized them, a few at a time. On Monday, I

sent the husband to town for cotton and gauze and made up some good pads and sterilized them. Fortunately I had bichloride tablets with me and of course I boiled all water used. The location of the well was about as bad as it could be and, in addition, surface water from melting snow was running into it.

The husband, also aged 19, did the cooking and washing, there was nothing else for him to do, and the mother and baby and lack of convenience kept me fairly busy. This sounds as if it was all very hard work but in reality it was not, the anxiety for fear of septic conditions being the only disagreeable part of it.

During the day a small black puppy superintended matters, rocking the chair which held the baby by pulling at the comfortable with which it was covered, or sleeping under the chair. It usually accompanied me if I went out of doors, and to walk across the yard with a bed-pan in one hand, a pail of water in the other, with a puppy tugging at my skirts or trying to climb up them, was no easy matter. If I went out in the night, the black cat scampered after me.

Fortunately it was fairly warm weather; blue birds, meadow larks and robins were close about the house, and one morning I saw four deer feeding on the hillside opposite. The nights were cold, but an "air-tight stove" and plenty of wood kept the house cozy and warm.

After this, when I start off for a case in the country, I shall carry absorbent cotton and gauze, enough for a few days; though I think this case was unusual owing to the young woman's ignorance of what she needed.

AN EASTERN NURSE IN MONTANA.

DISPOSAL OF REFUSE

I

DEAR EDITOR: I was on a case last summer in an apartment where I had no fire in the basement or elsewhere except a gas stove. I kept a covered pail for soiled dressings on the back porch. Every night after dark my patient's husband carried this to a vacant lot near by and burned the débris.

E. C. J.

II

DEAR EDITOR: In regard to the disposal of refuse in apartments, I would like to say to E. L. P. and other sister nurses that I found no difficulty in disposing of same. A great many houses have now continuous hot water, and there is the heater day and night, and a friendly talk with the janitor will bring what you desire; often you will find the open fireplace unused, but by just taking newspaper and lighting it towards the open chimney it can be cleared to burn rubbish.

About two years ago, on an obstetric case, I was requested by the attending physician to dispose of the placenta by putting it into the water-closet. I was horrified, but he laughingly assured me it would not come back. I finally did it and have done so on every obstetric case that finds me in the apartment house, regardless of the heater in the cellar or not, and have had no trouble nor heard of any disastrous results. I like to mention here that one must do it quickly and pull the chain as soon as the placenta is placed in the bowl, as the water is apt to overflow. I never tell the family and I have never been asked what I have done with it. Try it.

M. A. M.